

VZCZCXRO1461  
PP RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHNH  
DE RUEHHM #1229/01 3480233  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 140233Z DEC 07  
FM AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3435  
INFO RUEHHI/AMEMBASSY HANOI PRIORITY 2355  
RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE  
RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY 3654

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HO CHI MINH CITY 001229

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS, DRL/IRF, DRL/AWH

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: PHUM PGOV PREL KIRF VM  
SUBJECT: USCIRF IN HCMC: MEETING THE DISSIDENTS

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#### Summary

¶1. (SBU) The USCIRF delegation met with Do Nam Hai and Dr. Nguyen Dan Que to discuss the human rights situation in Vietnam. Both discussed the state of the democracy movement in Vietnam, the challenges facing democracy activists today (e.g., surveillance, harassment and arrest), and their belief that democracy and religious freedom are mutually reinforcing goals that bring together political and religious dissidents. Both Que and Hai placed religious freedom within the framework of human rights and democracy, but demurred when asked by USCIRF to comment on whether certain figures were religious vs. political prisoners. While Hai had no problems meeting the delegation at the New World Hotel on October 24, Dr. Que declined to attend due to increased police presence outside his residence. The delegation was able to meet Que the next evening at his residence without difficulties. End Summary.

#### Hai Cites Press Reports to Laud Commission's Visit

¶2. (SBU) Do Nam Hai thanked the Commission for its trip to Vietnam, calling international pressure necessary for the development of rights in Vietnam. Hai handed over Vietnamese-language newspaper (Thanh Nien) accounts of the Commission's meetings Hanoi, highlighting Commissioner Gaer's request to Deputy Minister of Public Security: carry out investigations of violations of religious freedom, free those arrested for peacefully expressing their political views, and create a mechanism to prevent future abuses. Hai applauded the approach as well as news that MPS allowed the Commissioners to visit jailed dissidents Le Thi Cong Nhan and Nguyen Van Dai in prison.

#### The Cost of Ignoring Human Rights

¶3. (SBU) While the GVN says there are no political or religious prisoners but only lawbreakers, Hai insisted that there are political prisoners arrested for peacefully expressing their political views. Nhan and Dai are certainly political prisoners, he stated, adding that there are others like Nguyen Dang Que, though not currently in jail, who are being monitored and harassed. Hai said that since he wrote an article in 2002 calling for a referendum on multiparty democracy he has been monitored constantly; currently four shifts of three security personnel watch him around the clock. He estimated the GVN cost of his personal surveillance at six thousand U.S. dollars per month, or "one hundred times Vietnam's average salary of \$60." He cited land protester Liu Thi Thu Dung (NFI) as another example of a dissident who is not allowed to leave the area around her home. (Note: Several activists have called GVN

surveillance and monitoring of their communications a form of "virtual house arrest," and noted the chilling effect it has had on the democracy movement over the past year. End note.)

14. (SBU) He recounted the development of Bloc 8406 and their internet publication of their democracy manifesto in April 2006.

He went on to state that once the GVN had achieved its APEC and WTO goals (in early 2007), there was a crackdown on dissidents so "fearsome" that Human Rights Watch called it the worst in twenty years. He added that those harassed, detained and arrested are patriots who believe that Vietnam needs human rights before it can develop economically -- without human rights, excessive power concentrated in a small group of leaders allows them to misappropriate assistance, capital and technology for their own advantage. WTO and UNSC are good elements of development but not enough and "Vietnamese intellectuals must voice the pain of the nation," Hai said.

Tentative on Religious Prisoners, But Hopeful

15. (SBU) When Commissioners asked Hai to explain the role that religious leaders played in Bloc 8406, he responded that religious freedom can help to advance political freedom and that political freedom ensures religious freedom, adding cryptically "the concepts can be different or the same." Another pressed Hai on whether Nhan and Dai were religious prisoners as well as political prisoners, and Hai replied that he did not know the details of their cases and could not say. A third noted that Hai had spoken generally of political and religious prisoners then asked for examples of religious prisoners; Hai instead offered Father Nguyen Van Ly as an example of someone who is a political prisoner and a religious figure.

16. (SBU) In response to a question from Commissioner Gaer, Hai said that democracy advocates do have support in Vietnam's universities. Hai said "the fear of being repressed" is waning in Vietnam and as this continues more will be joining together to fight for freedom and democracy. Hai remains unbowed by his treatment, remembering that it took twelve years for Vaclav

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Havel's 1977 Charter 77 to bear fruit in 1989.

Dr. Que on Politics and Religion

17. (SBU) Dr. Nguyen Dang Que, who was also scheduled to meet the delegation at the New World on the 25th, sent his son to explain he did not feel comfortable attending due to heavy police presence around his house, but invited the USCIRF to see him at home, which they did the next evening. When the delegation arrived, no surveillance units were evident outside Dr. Que's home and the meeting proceeded without interruptions. Dr. Que also spoke about his own experiences with the democracy movement and noted that while activists are not comfortable meeting openly, all groups and individuals are continuing to operate on their own to advance human rights and democracy in Vietnam. He cited the land rights movement as evidence of growing social unrest as a result of the GVN's "morally bankrupt" policies and his belief that economic factors, such as Vietnam's membership in the WTO and the growing middle class in urban centers, will continue to provide pressure for change in all arenas.

18. (SBU) When asked by Commissioners whether he made distinctions between religious vs. political activists, Que said that in some cases, politics and religion could not be separated. Dr. Que felt the GVN's Ordinance on Religion was also a form of government control, as it required churches to register and request permission for certain activities like choosing leaders and printing religious materials. Using "demagogic tricks," Que said, the GVN has isolated "stubborn spiritual leaders" like Father Ly, Central Highlands Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh and the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV)'s Thich Quang Do through imprisonment, monitoring and house arrest.

Que's Joint Communique

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¶9. (SBU) Dr. Que cited religious freedom and the release of religious and political prisoners as one of key items on his democracy agenda. He asked whether the delegation would be willing to co-sign a Joint Communique which he had prepared, which included as one of its points "...The Vietnamese government continues to persecute its citizens for the non-violent practice of faith, free speech, free press and democratic values, including continuous arrests, detention and harassment of members of UBCV, the Catholic Church, the Protestant Church, the Hoa Hao, the Cao Dai, and many other individuals who call for democracy and freedom in Vietnam"

¶10. (SBU) The Communique, which would be co-signed by USCIRF and Que's group, the Non-Violent Movement for Human Rights in Vietnam (Cao Trao Nhan Ban), called on the Vietnamese government to release religious leaders, dismantle "all forms" of control over religion, implement UN principles on religious freedom and guarantee the equal treatment for all religions, including the UBCV and Montagnard Protestants. The USCIRF delegation said while they agreed with all of the principles and GVN actions called for in the Communique, they could not sign without consulting with USCIRF headquarters. They offered to take the Communique back for review.

Comment:  
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¶11. (SBU) Do Nam Hai presented a spirited case on behalf of Vietnam's democracy advocates but tempered his responses when Commissioners pressed him on religious freedom. Que spoke broadly about the need for more democracy and freedom in Vietnam, including religious freedom, and did not make a distinction between those in jail for religious or political activism. Both dissidents agreed that conditions for pro-democracy activists have deteriorated over the past year, but feel political change in Vietnam will be inevitable. The question, as always, is timing. End comment.

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